

# Rise of Fascism in Italy under Mussolini

Public opinion was upset and annoyed with the small gains made by Italy in Paris 1919. Vittorio Orlando, Italian PM, lacked the political skill at an international level to negotiate. The nationalists and the fascists claimed that Italy had been cheated out of her due reward for their war effort and they blamed a weak government for this. The section of the Peace settlement that most annoyed them was the allocation of the Italian-speaking town of Fiume to Yugoslavia. Italian governments also failed to solve economic problems – run down industry, unemployment, high inflation and land hunger of the peasantry in Southern Italy. On the political front, Italians were appalled at the paralysis of parliamentary politics, frequent changes of government and political leaders of little or no ability.

Benito Mussolini was born in 1883, son of a Socialist blacksmith and a schoolmistress. After a short period as a teacher, Mussolini became involved in politics and was appointed editor of the socialist newspaper, *Avanti*. He was expelled from the party and set up his own newspaper. He joined the army but got severely wounded and was discharged. In 1919, he founded the fascist party in Milan. The fascists won 35 seats in the general election of 1921. They were helped by the fact that the PM Giolitti, in an attempt to restore the authority of the Liberal State, invites the fascists to join in a new coalition. As soon as the election was over, Mussolini repudiated the alliance. Two other coalition governments collapsed in the same year and the situation was chaotic. It was tailor-made for a seizure of power by anyone willing to take a chance. The Fascist threatened a march on Rome to give Italy a strong, effective government. Mussolini challenged the government to either solve Italy's problems or make way for the fascists. Fearing that this would lead to civil war, King Victor Emmanuel III gave into this blackmail and invites Mussolini to become PM.

Mussolini's first move was to bring an end to the years of weak coalition governments. By the Acerbo Law of 1923, the party gaining the greatest number of votes would win two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. It was not obvious at this time that the fascists would benefit from this law. His next move was to transform the legalised Blackshirts into the Volunteer Militia for national Security (MVSN). Its members swore allegiance to Mussolini not to the king. He encouraged the MVSN to use violence and intimidation during the election campaign of April 1924 so that the result was a victory for the fascists. They secured 64% of the votes and their two-thirds majority.

It is generally agreed by historians that until 1924 it was still possible to stop Mussolini. One politician brave enough to condemn him was Giacomo Matteotti, a Socialist deputy. He had declared in a speech how the fascists had won the 1924 election by fraud and violence. In June 1924, he was murdered by leading blackshirts. Mussolini denied knowledge of the crime but when he heard about it, tried to organise a cover up. This caused outrage and over 100 deputies withdrew from parliament in protest. They helped to isolate Mussolini by this move known as the "Aventine Succession". Only the king could have intervened to depose Mussolini but he did nothing and Mussolini recovered his position. The incident was a great shock for him and he was determined it would never happen again.

In 1925, all other political parties were suppressed and the fascist Party became the only "legitimate" party in the state. Mussolini established a totalitarian dictatorship. His next idea was the setting up of a Corporation System by which it was intended to replace the old ideas of Liberalism and Socialism. Trade unions were abolished and strikes and lockouts were forbidden. Each company and profession formed its own corporation. The scheme was completed in 1934 with the setting up of 22 Corporations. A General assembly of Corporations, presided over by Mussolini himself, decided on important industrial policy, like wages and prices. The Corporate State was to help preserve Capitalism and bring social

justice and real planning to the economy. But it never lived up to its claim of bringing social justice because it showed a bias towards the interests and purpose of the wealthier classes.

Mussolini aimed to obtain self-sufficiency, especially in food production. The Battle for the Grain was launched and the wheat harvest was doubled. A Battle for Land Reclamation was also started. Some 60,000 hectares of the malarial-infested Pontine Marshes were transformed and allowed for the resettlement of 75,000 families from the south. New motorways were built as well as railways, hospitals and hydro-electric dams and this provided worthwhile employment.

Italy was fortunate in having an efficient Minister for Finance, De Stefani who succeeded in balancing the books and attracting foreign investment. His dismissal by Mussolini saw change in economic policy. Italian finances got so out of control, that the lira had to be drastically devalued. Italy was hit by the Wall St crash and in 1932 unemployment exceeded one million. Mussolini's economic programme was insufficient to Italy's needs. The standard of living hardly improved for the majority of Italians. Under all the show of the Corporate State, the problems of poverty and shortages of raw materials remained.

Mussolini came to power in Italy with the aim of securing complete power for himself in a fascist state. He was to provide Italy with the mixed blessings of one of the earliest and longest dictatorships. The Corporate State was a success in some ways in that it brought so many jobs but it was also a failure in that it was biased towards the wealthier classes. But Mussolini would never enjoy the same success as Hitler because he lacked the power, conviction and strength behind the aggression.